

SOTHERN'S "HAMLET" PROVES VITAL, BUT NOT TRADITIONAL

His Performance at the National Theater Favorably Received—Investiture Lavish and Company Large.

"The Two Schools" a Good Comedy—"York State Folks" Scores a Hit—Usual Bills at the Other Houses.

Shakespeare's immortal tragedy of "Hamlet" was presented at the National Theater last night by a company of which Edwin H. Sothern was the foremost figure. This young actor, whose adventitious rise from the characters of light comedy to the enactment of the most exacting role in all dramatic literature must gratify deeply all lovers of stage presentations, embodied the part of Hamlet, and invested it with marked force, sympathy, and character. His company contributed a most satisfactory support, particularly in the person of Miss Cecilia Loftus, who appeared as Ophelia, and lent much charm of person to that thankless role. An audience of notable brilliance, even for Washington, received the performance respectfully and enthusiastically. "Hamlet" was thus most fortunately enacted, and the result is that Mr. Sothern has confirmed locally his title as the best American Hamlet since that of Edwin Booth.

This production has now continued through three seasons, and was seen in Washington last year. It was then much commended, Mr. Sothern's interpretation of the title role being estimated as untraditional but forceful, uneven but adequate. Since that day the entire material equipment of the company has been destroyed by fire. Particular interest centered on last night's performance in consequence because of the new and lavish investiture given the tragedy and because this Washington engagement immediately precedes a long stay in New York city, where Mr. Sothern will oppose his embodiment of the melancholy prince to that of all the earlier actors identified with the role in the theatrical annals of that capital.

Mr. Sothern is the last of a long line of distinguished actors who have undertaken this enactment in America. "Hamlet" was first played in this country by Lewis Hallam, who presented the tragedy in Philadelphia in 1759. From that day to this more than 100 male actors, two great actresses, Charlotte Cushman and Sarah Bernhardt, and a professional rope-dancer, John W. Hingler, have appeared as the chief character of the play. Of these nearly all contributed notable ability to their enactments, but only those who were foremost, for one reason or another, can be mentioned here—Thomas A. Cooper, whose performance in 1797 was ranked with that of John Philip Kemble; John Howard Payne, who excited much amazement as a boy Hamlet in 1804; Edmund Kean, and John W. Wallach, who appeared simultaneously about the year 1820; William A. Macready, a very popular actor at the height of his power in 1820; Junius Brutus Booth, who acted in the part intermittently during the twenty years ending in 1843; Edwin Forrest, whose robust impersonation continued through about the same period; Edgar L. Davenport, Lawrence Barrett, Barry Sullivan, and George Vandenhoff, perhaps the most distinguished group of actors the country ever knew, who acted in the sixth decade, and Edwin Booth, "The Ideal Hamlet of half the population of the country who have any idea at all of Hamlet's character." The most brilliant performance ever given in this country comprised a testimonial to Wallack given in New York, May 21, 1888, with Lawrence Barrett as the Ghost; Frank Mayo as Claudius; John Gilbert as Polonius; Eben Plympton as Laertes; John A. Lane as Horatio; Joseph Wheelock as the First Actor; Milnes Levich as the priest; Joseph Jefferson and William Florence as the grave diggers; Miss F. Ellogg as Gertrude; Miss Coglan as the Player Queen; Mme. Modjeska as the Ophelia—to the Hamlet of Edwin Booth.

All of these men conformed their enactment very largely with that of Betterton, an English actor, whose impression of the role was obtained from Sir William Davenant—the latter in his time having received instruction as to "Hamlet" from Shakespeare himself—and whose performance of the role was recorded in detail by Dean Swift in "The Tatler" of September 20, 1709: "Your admirer Mr. Betterton behaved himself so well," wrote the caustic churchman, "that, though now about seventy-six, he acted Youth, and by the prevalent power of proper manner, gesture, voice, appeared through the whole drama a youth of great expectations, vivacity and enterprise."

Dr. Swift and others of his day left so detailed an account of the Betterton Hamlet that it has become an accepted acting tradition, and has dominated the genius of all the American actors named, of Kemble, Mr. Tree, and Sir Henry Irving in England; of Bandman, Ross, Charles Fechter, Bogumil-Dawson, Barnay, Hassé—probably the foremost Continental actors who have appeared in the role. Salvini, the one successful independent, was, significantly, "powerful, but not effective." It is therefore entirely manifest that the role is steeped in tradition, on which point Wilson Barrett has said: "On the stage nothing is harder to kill than tradition. To no play has tradition done so much harm as to 'Hamlet.'"

Nevertheless, this traditional "Hamlet," as incorporated for example by Edwin Booth, affords an admirable, indeed the only, measure for adjudging this newest interpretation. Mr. Booth, following the Betterton tradition, portrayed Hamlet as a man of thirty, and denoted his nature as possessed of spirituality, an acute and profound melancholy, a romantic spirit, an air of grace, a state of carriage, a poetic mind, and a tender heart. The play was sadly shortened—although it still held the auditor in his seat more than four hours—and it was in several instances, all of them to the sad mangling of the written play, boldly remade to suit the actors. This was the conception of the part which Booth accepted, and, according to Mr. Sothern's press announcements, it has been closely followed in this latest production. Each great actor contributed a thread of personality to the role, of course, which colored the whole pattern. Kean was essentially oratorical; Wallack, formal and classic; Junius Brutus Booth so spiritual and profound in his melancholy that his influence was felt even when he was not on the stage; Forrest inconspicuously strong and well fed; Davenport scholarly and quiet; Edwin Booth melancholy, romantic, magnetic, tender, lithe in figure, and wondrously poetic.

Mr. Sothern's Hamlet, however otherwise designated, is, if written testimony is valuable in such a case, the most volatile and spirited of the entire series. He gesticulates with much freedom. His voice is often pitched high and loud. His asides are often expletive. In brief, he presents Hamlet as a man of vivid, flesh and blood impulses, aroused by the wildest and deepest emotions life can evoke. He is consistently intellectual and intelligent; his bearing is regularly vigorous and graceful, and he is manifestly the same man, swayed by supernatural visions and deep emotion, and affecting madness merely for the fulfillment of his revengeful purpose. He is more a man of action than the traditional Hamlet, an achievement entirely conformable with the written play if attained by other methods, and less the man of perplexity, confusion, self-involvement, and hopeless melancholy. This is at least the effect of his acting, however he may conceive the role, and it is an effect which rouses his audience to an unexpected sympathy for the young Dane. Last night's auditors applauded him vociferously at the close of each act (except the fourth, wherein he does not appear), and interrupted the action at the close of nearly every one of his more notable speeches.

It will be seen, then, that Mr. Sothern's enactment of this year, like that shown last year, is a disappointment to those who regard Hamlet as Shakespeare and the long line of Mr. Sothern's predecessors regarded him. Hamlet is essentially a prince of melancholy. His temperament is distinctively introspective. He is palpably a man of deep thought and tender action. As the poet Shelley designated it, his character is "wrapped in its own shapeless horror, like a ghost." Where Hamlet should be tender Mr. Sothern is forceful and loud spoken. Where the prince is hesitant, Mr. Sothern is violent.

If Mr. Sothern intended to reproduce the Betterton Hamlet he has failed signally. If, as seems more likely the case, he has conceived his Hamlet along independent lines, he has sacrificed the delicacy of the role for an inutile force and unpoetic virility. James Russell Lowell regarded the main actors of the story as fortuitous sacrifices to Hamlet's irresolution. The lesson of the drama he felt to be this: That will is fate, and that when will once abdicates the inevitable successor in the regency is chance. Both of these judgments are opposed by Mr. Sothern, objectively, earnestly and effectively. He seems to have looked at the poem from the outside, when like a stained glass window it appears clouded and confused. But the force of the presentment is indisputable. Of this unconventional enactment much can be said in defense. In the utterances of great passions something must be indulged to the extravagance of nature; the subdued tones to which pathos and sentiment are limited cannot express a tempest of the soul. Wilson Barrett's warning against the tradition of Hamlet, already quoted, must be borne in mind. It must be remembered that Shakespeare intended to present in Hamlet not a new metaphysical entity, but a man of flesh and blood, although it is decidedly curious that the character is prophetically typical of that introversion of mind which is so constant a phenomenon of these latter days, of that overconsciousness which wastes itself on analyzing the motives of action instead of acting. Finally there come the words of Edwin Booth's magnanimous defense of Barrett:

"What right have I, whose temperament and mode of thinking may be dissimilar to yours, to denounce your exposition of such a puzzle as Hamlet? He is the epitome of mankind, not an individual; a sort of magic mirror in which all men and all women see the reflex of themselves; and, therefore, his story always been, is still, and will ever be the most popular of stage tragedies."

A. D. A.

"York State Folks" at the Lafayette.

A fair-sized audience last night enjoyed Wright's "York State Folks" at the Lafayette Opera House. Announced on the program as "the prettiest of all pastoral plays," the attraction goes far toward deserving that high commendation. Sweet, natural, homelike, it is a play to make one think of better things and of the brighter side of human nature.

For a first night the play went smoothly. There were some delays between the scenes, though the staging is unusually beautiful. Two scenes depicting living rooms in the "York" home of Uncle Myra Cooper.

Another scene shows "Maple Lane," Sunday night, after church, while another is the wagon works of old Simon Peter Martin, Martinville's heaviest taxpayer and president of the village.

The vested choir of Christ Church, Georgetown, made a great hit last

night, and their singing was all that could be asked except that there was too little of it to satisfy the audience.

A Refreshing Pastoral.

The play is simple and refreshing and the scenery is charming. It all turns upon the goodness of heart of Uncle Myra and the bitter spirit of Simon. The latter's son Frank has fallen into evil ways in his visit to the city and has lost some of his father's money to the gamblers. Simon is at odds with Myra on account of the latter favoring the advent of a railroad which Myra thinks will be for the good of the village, and has forbidden the marriage of Frank and Jennie, Myra's niece. Frank asks Myra to save him from the results of his sin, and the old man, having confidence in the boy, forgives him and loans him part of the village tax funds placed in his hands as collector.

Frank vows never to touch cards again, and keeps his word, but a sudden meeting of the village guardians finds the old organ builder short in his own accounts. Too loyal to tell Simon to whom he has loaned the money, though charged with theft, he assumes the burden of ignominy which Simon seeks to cast upon him. Simon calls in the villagers to hear the old man accused of theft. He is about to speak the words which would estrange them forever when he is stricken with apoplexy.

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